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ON PAGE 14

The El Salvador Rights Campaign Begins to Fade

"We've won," said an administration foreign policy aide wryly after the El Salvador hearing this week. "We've succeeded in making the issue of human rights in El Salvador boring."

It was hard to fault his judgment.

The administration has just made a determination that the Salvadoran government is making progress in human rights, and thus qualifies for more U.S. aid. Last week the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a lively hearing to examine the certification.

This week the drama moved to the Senate, where the Foreign Relations Committee staged its own hearing on the issue. Here the press coverage was leaner. Most of the Democratic senators—Biden, Sarbanes, Cranston—didn't show up to see the administration's witnesses.

The most important event of the day was that Bianca Jagger was in the audience. She was working on the problem of Central American refugees, she said in a throaty voice. And "beyond the refugees," she went on, she was interested in "the implications of the U.S. military presence" in the region.

Ms. Jagger and the rest of us got to listen to exchanges between senators and ad-

A: I would define the extremists as those who are attempting to use violence to achieve their goals.

Q: So you'd have to be to the right of (Constituent Assembly President Roberto) D'Aubuisson to be considered an extremist?

A: You'd have to be engaged in murder; you'd have to be working against, rather than in, the political system.

And a little later on:

Sen. Christopher Dodd to Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Enders: Who do you think is really running El Salvador today?

A: El Salvador is run by a coalition government. They all interact; it is a pluralist government in which there is no one single individual who dominates all the rest. That was the kind of government we tried to foster.

Q: Who's running the country, Tom?

This was pretty tame stuff. There were no direct confrontations. There were none of the usual suggestions that the Reagan administration's El Salvador policy was cruel, dishonest or both.

Rep. Gerry Studds came to the House El Salvador hearing last week backed by a resolution he was sponsoring to declare the administration's certification null and void. He had already gotten 84 of his fellow congressmen to sign it. By this week his luck had changed, and he was able to push the total only up to 97.

Former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Robert White, now a professional critic of the administration's policy toward that country, tried last week to accuse the CIA of illegitimate interference in Salvadoran elections on the grounds that the agency had provided equipment like the invisible ink system that was used to prevent voting fraud. By this week Ambassador White had not found any appreciable audience.

El Salvador was once a matter of burning concern to the administration, the media and a whole collection of foreign policy and civil rights organizations; now it attracts major attention from just a few congressmen and their attendant special-interest groups. The rapid change tells something about the way human rights has been used in Washington and about its limitations as a weapon of partisan warfare.

Since the mid-1970s, the left has employed human rights issues to beat up on the right, and in El Salvador the left thought it had found itself a ripe and typical target.

But two sorts of events intervened to stop this particular bandwagon. First, of course, came the Salvadoran election: It decisively repudiated the guerrillas and suggested that this time the U.S. government may not have backed the wrong moral horse. Most foreign policy interest groups on the right or the left really can't mobilize their energy for more than one big issue at a time; the elections made the El Salvador issue seem like a good one to drift away from.

Second, the administration knew how to exploit this situation. It grabbed for the high moral ground. The State Department produced a certification report that was full of charts, tables of evidence, graphs tabulating the accusations made by both friendly and unfriendly human rights groups. Administration spokesmen refused to label their decision to certify El Salvador as anything more enthusiastic than a "close call." They did not give their opponents any easy targets for outrage.

In fact the Reaganites took the offensive, arguing that the certification process is a distinctly unsatisfactory way to make our aid decisions. All these tactics together severely depleted the fund of high dudgeon needed to launch a successful attack.

The administration did not win a flashy victory in El Salvador. But it did give notice that human rights policy is not going to be such an easily available cudgel in the hands of whichever side in the political debate can summon up the more convincing case of moralistic rage.

Capital Chronicle

by Suzanne Garment

ministration officials that went something like this:

Sen. Paul Tsongas to Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams: To the question "What are we doing there?" you made the statement that we are basically trying to support the center against the extremes. It's difficult to figure out who the extremes of the right are.